

## How Did Christianity Begin?

### Mike Bird on Earliest Christianity

'Why did Christianity become predominantly gentile?' (p. 153). That's the question but one will look in vain for an answer in this particular chapter. 'In the early church the inclusion of Gentiles was never a matter of dispute – it was the basis of their inclusion that prompted division: did Gentiles need to take on the Jewish Law in order to enter the Church?' (p.154). I think Peter would have wondered if Mike understood the issues aright while he was on the roof experiencing his vision of the sheet and the beasties and when he then hears the heavenly voice scold him for thinking Gentiles unworthy of the Gospel. The question was exactly whether or not Gentiles had a part in the Kingdom- not how they got in it. At any rate, Mike's Socratic method (of answering a question with a question) gets us nowhere. Neither does his remark that '... Paul expected his converts to replicate to some degree his evangelistic efforts' (p. 154). If I recall, Paul's habit was to go to Synagogue first and then, and only then, to the Gentiles in the villages he visited. This doesn't exactly support Bird's claim that Paul wanted his actions replicated and it certainly doesn't show how Christianity became predominantly Gentile. If anything, it suggests that Paul was making every effort to keep the Church Jewish (or why else would he bother with the Synagogues?)

'Why did Christianity split from Judaism?' (p. 154). Again, unfortunately, we wait and hope in vain for an answer to that question. Indeed, we get a bit of – well – confusion for our troubles. Bird notes 'The gradual split between Judaism and Christianity is a complex one and the various details are mooted in scholarship' (p. 155). What does he mean here? How is the split 'mooted' in scholarship? I am at an utter loss to understand what he's after here. I'm also at a loss as to how to take his claim a few pages over that '... the destruction of the Temple in 70 .... represented [for the Jews] the end of the world of Judaism as they knew it' (p. 157). Really? How did they ever carry on? The destruction of the Temple may have been a traumatic event, but it didn't represent the end of Judaism as they knew it- because they knew it, in the diaspora, as temple-less in practical terms anyway. They had Torah, Circumcision, and Sabbath- the three pillars of Judaism. Their faith and their practice remained in place and has, in fact, remained in place without a Temple for a pretty long time now. In any event, temple-less mother Judaism doesn't explain the separation of the child Christianity from the mother. It wasn't a cause- and it wasn't an effect. And finally, in this connection, Mike mentions the famed 'academy' at Yavneh (Jamnia)(p. 158). We've known for years that the supposed 'canonization' of the Hebrew Bible was completed in practice long before any so called 'Council at Jamnia' which, in any event, most likely never took place anyway. So why pretend it's proof of the 'parting of the ways'? Bird offers nine 'answers' to the question posed at the section heading and none of them is a real answer.

'Why did Christianity win over the Roman empire?' (p. 159). Well, it didn't, Mike. Rome was and remained till Constantine (and after, let's face it), a purely pagan culture. Christianity didn't win over the empire, it won over the Emperor, who then enforced Christianity on the population (which means they would have been as 'into it' as an 8 year old boy is 'into' Church while his friends are out riding their ATV's. But allow me for a moment the spirit of charity and presume that Christianity actually did win hearts and minds and all of Rome loved the Gospel in the wake of Paul's purely gentile oriented mission. Bird never tells us how this happened. Hence, thus far three questions have been posed and no satisfactory answer provided. Hopefully things will turn out better with the next question:

'Was Christianity influenced by pagan religions?' (p. 159). His answer? Yes! Hallelujah! It was!!!! Oh but wait, that's just a temporary concession. It seems that '... analogy does not prove genealogy, and the question of who borrowed from whom is a complex one, especially when it comes

to the mystery cults' (p. 161). So, kind reader, it only APPEARS as though Christianity was influenced by other religions. Fact is, it seems that things really happened the other way around...

'When did Jesus become God?' (p. 161). Yup- you guessed it. From the very earliest moments of Palestinian Christianity a high Christology was in place. 'Kyrios ... was used by Greek-speaking Jews for the Hebrew tetragrammaton (Yahweh) and was part of the religious vocabulary of Greek-speaking Jews' (p. 161). So when Jesus was called 'Lord' or as Mike would probably have us believe 'LORD' it was because everyone who used the word really were thinking 'Yahweh' in their heads. The only problem with this is that 'kyrios' simply means 'sir' and when used in the LXX doesn't replicate the divine name at all but the substitute 'Adonai' (sir, originally and primarily). To be sure, 'Kyrios' came to signify 'God'- but the New Testament doesn't know it that way outside of the Johannine School.

Mike's done a good job of asking important questions in this chapter- none of which he answers. Until the conclusion, when he writes 'It was the cosmopolitan vision of Christianity which explains the ultimate separation from Judaism and its success in the Greco-Roman world' (p. 163). That, in Bird's view evidently, is how Christianity began. The Church was so accommodating to the world that everyone felt comfortable in it. The Jews, again evidently, failed to gather such a large following because they weren't cosmopolitan enough. A most peculiar point of view, to say the least.